

German Submarine Mail in World War I

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Christian Rüger asks in the January 2004 Bulletin about a cover from Germany to the U.S. that was supposed to be carried by a submarine but apparently never made it. The cover is well known in other philatelic circles, so here is an abbreviated history.

When World War I began in Europe in 1914, the United States remained neutral and continued to trade with Germany, which was allowed under international law so long as the items of trade did not include armaments or the materials to make them. By 1916, however, Britain had gained control

of the Atlantic and trade by traditional merchant ship became impossible. Determined to continue the trade, Germany built a merchant submarine aptly named DEUTSCHLAND. Entering service at Bremen in May, 1916, the submarine made two commercial voyages to North America. The first arrived in Baltimore on July 10, 1916 with 750 tons of dyestuffs. She returned to New London, Conn. on November 1, 1916. A third voyage was planned for early 1917, but deteriorating relations between Germany and the U.S. made the voyage unfeasible. The submarine was turned over to the German navy, which armed her and commissioned her as U#155 on

Feb. 19, 1917. The submarine was confiscated by Britain after the war and eventually scrapped.

Although the exact timing and routes of her voyages to America were kept secret (for obvious reasons), the fact of the trips was highly publicized in newspaper and magazine articles. Many picture postcards were also produced, and my collection of seven different is probably only a modest representation of those available.

There are several philatelic aspects to the voyages. When World War I broke out American industry was still heavily dependent on German technology, especially for chemicals. When the U.S. finally joined the war and German dyes were no longer available, the Bureau of Engraving and Printing had considerable difficulty in obtaining quality inks, which is one of the reasons for the many changes in printing technologies that it adopted in 1917 and 1918. There are also rumors that the submarine carried mail on its two voyages. I understand that no special markings were used, however, and it is impossible to identify these covers unless an original letter is still enclosed which mentions the means of travel. Regular mail between Germany and the U.S.

continued in 1916, carried by ships of neutral nations such as Sweden.

Based on the plans to carry mail on the third voyage, the German post office accepted mail in December, 1916 and January 1917 for the voyage, charging an extra two marks in cash for the service - a considerable fee. When the trip was canceled, the post office decided to return the letters and refund the fee. The story I have heard is that each letter was taken back to the sender by a postman, who refunded the two marks, and then asked the sender to remove the contents and give him back the envelope, which was kept by the German post office as a receipt for the refund. The envelopes eventually became available in the philatelic marketplace (a polite way of saying they were stolen from the German post office archives and sold). Because each was opened in haste to remove the letter, most are damaged to some extent. They are relatively expensive, by the way, my records say I paid \$65.00 for mine.

I enclose an illustration of what is probably the best known picture postcard of DEUTSCHLAND and her commander, Captain Koenig.

